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THE MEXICAN IMMIGRANT

Some Observations on Mexican Immigration

By HON. JAMES L. SLAYDEN¹

Formerly Member of Congress, San Antonio, Texas

THE importance of the question of immigration from Mexico can hardly be overestimated. It has a direct bearing on the general subject of immigration which Congress has been considering for years, and which has not yet been solved. It is tied up with the greatest of all of our problems, that of race mingling. It may be, roughly speaking, considered from three angles, economical, racial and political.

Economically considered, the Mexican immigrant is usually well received. Until a very recent time there has been no real protest, for he nearly always went straight to the farms where his labor was most urgently needed, or into domestic service where clamorous housewives welcomed him in spite of his hopeless inefficiency.

Having practically no training in the mechanic arts his occasional essay in that direction only excited the contempt of trade-unionists. He was not regarded as even a possible competitor for their jobs, but there begin to be signs that the unionists are changing their minds in that respect with the natural, resultant suspicion and antagonism. When contractors for barracks and other United States army buildings, working on the extravagant cost plus 10 per cent plan in 1917 and 1918, employed hundreds of Mexicans as carpenters who hardly knew a saw

¹Ex-chairman, American Group of Interparliamentary Union; President, American Peace Society; Trustee, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Member, World Court League.—The EDITOR.

from a hammer and paid them six to seven dollars for an abbreviated eight-hour day, organized labor began to take notice. They were not efficient, but the 10 per cent was made bigger and bigger all the time. The farmers and other employers of labor are still complaining that it ruined them, and the farmers say that it is no longer possible to grow crops profitably.

FARM EMPLOYMENT

Farmers in the Southwest habitually plant more cotton than they and their families can cultivate, even with the help of such laborers as are more or less permanently attached to the plantations. Cotton is an exacting crop and must have prompt attention at certain periods in its growth. It matures during July, August and September, and if not "picked" (harvested) by the end of November it is in serious danger of being damaged by rain and storms. Thus it becomes necessary to pick it with great haste and that makes strong competition for labor. This same demand for labor in the fields empties the kitchens and arouses the indignation of housekeepers. Industrious, capable cotton pickers earned from four to six dollars a day during the season just closed.

To supply this labor so urgently needed—a necessity that has been emphasized by the movement of Negroes from the farms—it has been the practice for many years to bring in Mexicans. Before the enactment of the Contract Labor Law it was easy to do this.

Neighbors would combine and send an agent to Northern Mexico and he would bring back the number needed and distribute them among the farmers contributing to the enterprise.

As a rule these contracts between employer and employe were faithfully executed and time and time again the same Mexicans would return to Texas and work on the same farms. Now and then one more ambitious than the rest would acquire land by lease or purchase and begin farming on his own account, and one more piece of raw material was thrown into the American melting-pot. Usually, however, they would go back to Mexico to display or dissipate their earnings, for the average Mexican is as prodigal as the Negro who is, perhaps, the greatest spendthrift in the world.

The law that made it illegal to contract for alien labor was a blow to the farmers, and some of them, through ignorance of the law, found themselves in trouble with the Federal courts. Its enforcement caused a serious stringency in the farm labor market. However, the Mexicans who wanted to come to Texas to pick cotton and earn in six weeks more than they ordinarily earned at home in six months had learned when they would be needed and many came without contracts but with the certainty of employment.

Then in 1917 Congress put another barrier in the way of the cotton planter. The entrance head tax was increased to eight dollars and the rules for inspection were made much more rigid. It is doubtful if this law has had the effect of lessening legal immigration from Mexico to the United States, but it has certainly increased the number of illegal entries.

For about a thousand miles Texas is separated from Mexico by the Rio Grande, which for eleven months of the year can be waded by a ten-year

old boy, and it is much cheaper to wade than to pay the head tax of eight dollars, and so 75 per cent of the Mexican immigrants scorn the conveniences of the established stations and come over without the knowledge of the agents of the law.

There is evidence available to American officials that some of the underpaid officers of Mexico have suggested "through a friend" to intending emigrants to the United States that if they must leave their own country they can avoid the examination, fumigation, and especially the tax of eight dollars, by crossing above or below the established stations and save at least four dollars, the other four being paid to the "friend" of the officer.

Two Mexicans were arrested in San Antonio during the week in which this is written, each of whom had on his person a card, printed in Spanish, saying that the man who presented it would put intending emigrants into the United States for half the head tax exacted at the stations. The card also said that the people who undertook to do this service were headquarters for the distribution of Bolshevik literature. This story is from an absolutely reliable source.

It is not an exaggeration to say that three-fourths of the immigrants from Mexico to the United States in the last three and a half years have come in illegally.

The demand for Mexican laborers is widespread and they can now be found as far north as Minneapolis and Chicago and east to the Mississippi River. Nearly all the great railways between the Alleghenies and the Pacific have some Mexicans employed as section hands. The competition of railways for laborers from Mexico, on whom farmers feel they have a prior claim, is not welcomed by the latter. They discovered them, and first brought

them over, and they feel that they should be left for farm service.

It is becoming difficult to keep these imported workers on the farms for, like the negroes, they are gregarious, want to be with their countrymen, and have developed a taste for the movies and the white lights. Equal remuneration will take them all away from the farms and to the city as they never consider the increased cost of living there.

Ever since the head tax was doubled and more stringent regulations for the inspection of the immigrant to ascertain his moral, mental and physical fitness for residence or citizenship in the United States were put into operation, there has been little or no decline in the authorized entries. This is probably due to the fact that importers of such labor urgently need the workmen and are willing to pay the tax to keep the immigrant in hand. If he crossed illegally he would have to be hunted for in Texas, and that would be an appalling task. These admissions by permission of the Department of Labor really appear to be in violation of the spirit and letter of the act of February, 1917. The Commissioner-General of Immigration in his report for the fiscal year of 1919 says that "availing itself of the discretionary power conferred by Section 3 of the Immigration Law to admit for temporary purposes aliens otherwise inadmissible, the department, in answer to insistent demands, authorized the suspension of the contract labor, head tax, and illiteracy test provisions of that law in favor of aliens from Mexico coming to the United States for employment in agricultural pursuits, as railroad laborers, for certain work on buildings under construction by the Government, or to do common labor in mines." These "insistent" demands were made by farmers, railway

officials, Boards of Trade and other civic organizations.

Between July 1, 1918 and July 30, 1919, the period covered by the last available report, there were admitted under these arrangements 20,643 Mexican aliens. In the same year there were admitted 9,000 others, but, presumably, in full compliance with the text of the law. All of them were distributed to Texas, Arizona, California, Idaho and other states. Farms took 10,491, and the railways about 10,000. Texas, as usual, absorbed the larger number. At the present time the admission of aliens who do not meet the requirements of law is limited to farm labor; yet the fact seems to be that once in the country these immigrants find a way to avoid the conditions of admission and join their fellow countrymen who are employed in towns and on railways. They dislike the comparative isolation of farm life, and know that where two or three Mexicans are gathered together there is sure to be a game of chance—a lure that few men of their race can resist. During February, March and April of 1920 they came to Texas in appalling numbers. There were so few immigration guards and officials on the border that it was impossible to stop the invasion. Hundreds of them, ragged, filthy paupers who could not have paid the head tax and crossed legally, came with wives and children, and made their way to San Antonio, regarded by the average Mexican as the one real metropolis of the United States.

At times hundreds of them were trailing the roads between San Antonio and Laredo. They came in any vehicle they could buy or get, but by far the greater number were afoot without baggage or food. To supply these deficiencies they would stop here and there to do a day's work or beg, and the beggars of Spain and Italy are

the merest amateurs compared to those of Mexico.

Two thousand or more of them were gathered in San Antonio at one time. During March, 1920 the Associated Charities had to feed three hundred or more daily for about a week while efforts were made to put them on a self-supporting basis.

Inquiries at the Chamber of Commerce, which had undertaken to find employment for them, brought the information that they were distributed to farms, and were being paid a wage of from a dollar and a half to two dollars per day. On the other hand, a labor organization (the Trades Assembly) denied the statement of the Chamber of Commerce and contended that they were taking the places of mechanics and other workers in the town; but, as the writer has been told, the Assembly could not tell where they were employed, nor from whom they got the information that they were so employed.

While these refugees from the "poverty and scorn" of Mexico were eating the bread of charity in San Antonio the Fall committee, from the Senate, which seemed to be seeking a cause for quarrel with Mexico, arrived. They tried to find the cause for such an extraordinary invasion, and to learn from what part of Mexico it came. The local United States immigration office declares that the enquiry developed the fact that the greater number came from southern and central Mexico, quite distinguishing it from the steady flow of immigration from the border states. The witnesses said they came because it was impossible to get food and clothes in their own country, that they were trying to escape starvation, and had walked most of the way. They were headed for the Promised Land, and no obstacle was insuperable.

As in all invasions of this sort more

human derelicts were left in our larger towns, more beggars appeared on our streets, and the average of health in city and country was lowered appreciably. Life in the streets was made more picturesque and interesting for tourists, and units to swell the census totals were acquired, which, in the minds of some people, is compensation enough for the lowered standard of citizenship and the increased burden of taxation.

RACIAL AND POLITICAL

This steady incoming of an alien race, not altogether white, is welcomed by some Americans, tolerated by others and utterly abhorred by those who look beyond the next cotton crop or the betterment of railway lines.

Large planters short of labor, because of the extraordinary hegira of Negroes in the last few years, know their value and welcome the Mexican immigrants as they would welcome fresh arrivals from the Congo, without a thought of the social and political embarrassment to their country. On the other hand, the small southern farmers (and they are the greater number) who cultivate their land with the help of their children, do not want the Mexicans, and would gladly see the movement of Negroes go on until the last one was settled in New England or Illinois or wherever they may be most happy, prosperous and welcome.

But both Negroes and Mexicans are here yet in large numbers, and close observers begin to detect a feeling of jealousy and dislike between them. In Texas and other southern states the Mexican is classed as white in public conveyances, hotels and places of amusement which does not make for good feeling between him and the Negro, and the Mexican, even of very low class, is not much inclined to social intimacy with the latter.

That to substitute one for the other may be jumping from the frying-pan into the fire is a thought that will intrude itself.

Racially speaking, the Mexican immigrant does carry an element of danger, for it can not be denied that with the American masses who come in contact with him there exists a certain latent hostility. That this prejudice is mutual is amply shown day by day by the tone of Mexican newspapers, by the frantic appeals by the Mexican demagogue, by the testimony of travellers or American residents in Mexico, and by certain fantastic projects entertained from time to time in official circles during the administration of President Carranza. That he believed it possible to excite the American negroes to revolt is quite true, and that his emissaries undertook to execute the foolish scheme can not be doubted.

Less than eight years ago a party of Mexican revolutionists, as they called themselves, invaded Texas, declared the state reannexed to Mexico, proclaimed the "Plan of San Diego," and promised social and political supremacy to the negroes. They killed a few citizens of the United States, derailed a train and murdered the passengers, and destroyed property (the invariable curtain raiser to a Mexican revolution) but some straight-shooting Texans soon convinced them of the error of their way, and those who could sit a horse hurried back to the southern side of the Rio Bravo.

Politically the Mexicans were vastly more important in Texas a few years ago than they are now. The white population has increased much more rapidly than immigrants have come or Mexican children been born. This has made them politically impotent in spite of the fact that they are easily gathered into clubs or "juntas" and

voted solidly by their leaders. Amended election laws also had a part in destroying their political power. Every voter now pays a poll-tax many months before the election and must make his own ballot. Many Mexicans will not do the first and can not do the last. This may not be true of the next generation as they attend our public schools without cost, and are even provided with textbooks as freely as the children of our own citizens. Until very recently citizens of Bexar county, just outside of San Antonio, men of business in the city and taxpayers have been compelled to pay a special fee if their children attended the city schools while those of Mexican refugees, driven from home by revolutions, had textbooks and schooling without cost. This condition had to be changed because of the growing indignation on the part of the overburdened American taxpayers.

In Texas the word Mexican is used to indicate the race, not a citizen or subject of the country. There are probably 250,000 Mexicans in Texas who were born in the state but they are "Mexicans" just as all blacks are Negroes though they may have five generations of American ancestors.

Most Mexicans are Indians or *Mestizos* (mixed white and Indian blood) and between them and the other inhabitants of Mexico there is a sharply defined social distinction. The upper classes, of European ancestry, are frequently educated in Spain, France or the United States, and few of them become immigrants unless forced out by revolutions, when they go to San Antonio, El Paso or Los Angeles. At home they are the merchants, big planters, bankers and professional men.

With rare exceptions these people stay at home, look after their private affairs and do not meddle with politics. They would make good and useful

citizens of any country. When one of them does go in for politics (or revolution, which is the same thing in Mexico) he does more mischief, because above his wicked heart is a cleverer head. He easily becomes the leader of the low-browed, poverty-stricken peon class, and by perfervid appeals to the prejudice of the thoughtless and uneducated mass of Indians and the promise of an impossible Utopia quickly converts them into murderous bandits. Resounding phrases about the Constitution, whether that of 1857 or that of Queretaro, makes no difference—and the rights of the Indians, mixed with contemptuous remarks about the "Gringoes" and the hated "Colossus of the North" soon can make fiends of otherwise quiet and useful men.

Of all people trying to conduct government the Mexican is most in need of wise and firm leaders. Of course it

is perilous to say it at this time when the "uplifter" is abroad in the land, but to the writer (and to most others who know Mexico) it seems essential, if the country is ever to be lifted out of carnage and chaos, to have some such man as Porfirio Diaz at the head of affairs. After fifty-six years of the most chaotic and bloody conditions he did create an orderly and nation-building government, and that is what Mexico must have or perish. Many people who know him hope that such a man has been found in Alvaro Obregon.

These are the people, high and low, from whom thousands of immigrants are coming to the United States. What it may mean for Americans in the future no one can tell. Probably our safety and peace lie in the fact that as yet so few of them, comparatively, are coming.

Immigration Along Our Southwest Border

By J. BLAINE GWIN

Secretary, Associated Charities, El Paso, Texas

PREVIOUS to 1910 the immigration from Mexico was due entirely to economic causes. Laborers came north with their families to work during the summer in the mines and at agricultural work but at the beginning of winter the majority would return to their homeland to spend their wages. In Mexico during that time laborers were paid only about twenty-five cents a day. Public records give only a very faint idea of the number that crossed the border previous to 1910. Little attempt was made to keep track of the ebb and flow of the tide of Mexican laborers.

At the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, the rush of Aliens to cross over into America constituted

a real menace to the health and standards of living for the border communities. The principal cause of this increased migration was revolutionary rather than economic. The majority of these immigrants remained in the States until about 1915 and since that time there has been a fairly steady stream of returning refugees and laborers. More have returned during the last few months than at any previous period due to the present peaceful conditions in Mexico. Most of these came north with no money and little clothing, sandals (huraches) instead of shoes, wide sombreros, and blankets wrapped around them instead of coats. They are returning with rolls of money, often several hundred dol-